

## The Flood

Continued

retired fire chief, he was then a young fire marshal. "We lost our furniture and everything, and there was nothing I could do about it."

As the flood spread, residents of the West End began to leave their homes. The far-sighted drove themselves out by car, but even in the early stages escape could be arduous. Because of flooded streets, drivers had to take circuitous routes to high ground. A trip that normally would take 15 minutes might be a two-hour journey.

When the water got too high for cars, trucks and trains provided means of escape. At Union Sta-

tion, refugees waited for hours to get trains out of the city. At Ursuline Academy, 806 E. Chestnut St., a group of nuns escaped the rising waters on an Oertel's beer truck. "Imagine the scene," wrote Sister Carmelita Doyle. "Pouring down rain, an open truck, 10 nuns standing with raised umbrellas, suitcases in water, umbrellas dripping on each other's guimpes and habits."

The driver gunned the motor, and the beer truck backed out of the convent yard. "Look out, sisters," he shouted; "get ready for a jolt! Hold on tight!"

Sister Sylvester Alhaus whispered to one of the nuns. "There's nothing to hold on to!"

Late on "Black Sunday," the flood overwhelmed electrical generators and the city was in darkness. WHAS continued to broad-

cast by relaying its signal over telephone to Nashville station WSM and later used emergency power from Kentucky Utilities. Exhausted announcers broadcast flood bulletins for 187½ continuous hours until Feb. 1. One young announcer was Foster Brooks, now a successful actor and comedian.

Radio was a valuable aid to rescuers and a civilizing presence for thousands of refugees sitting around their crystal sets. The newspapers were forced to suspend production in Louisville but printed special flood editions in Shelbyville and later in Lexington.

Refugees jammed City Hall, which, like the Armory and parts of the downtown business district, were located on islands of high ground.

Grafton described the scene at

City Hall. "Everyone is asking questions, and since we wear uniforms we are supposed to know the answers, but we don't. No one knows the answers. No one knows where anything is or who to take orders from."

Some refugees, wrote Grafton, tried to cut through the waiting by pulling a few strings. "I'm getting my first taste of the contemptible parasites who are sure that if they can just whisper into the ear of Good Friend John Doe, who works in the City Engineering Department, all other functions will be dropped at once until the whisperer has been given a special dispensation."

Dazed by shock, the refugees at City Hall and elsewhere often seemed worried by problems that were absurdly minor. "One woman, on finding her telephone dead

and her gas low, came to call the gas company to increase the gas pressure," wrote Virginia Emrich. "Another wanted to phone the milk man and scold him for failure to deliver her milk."

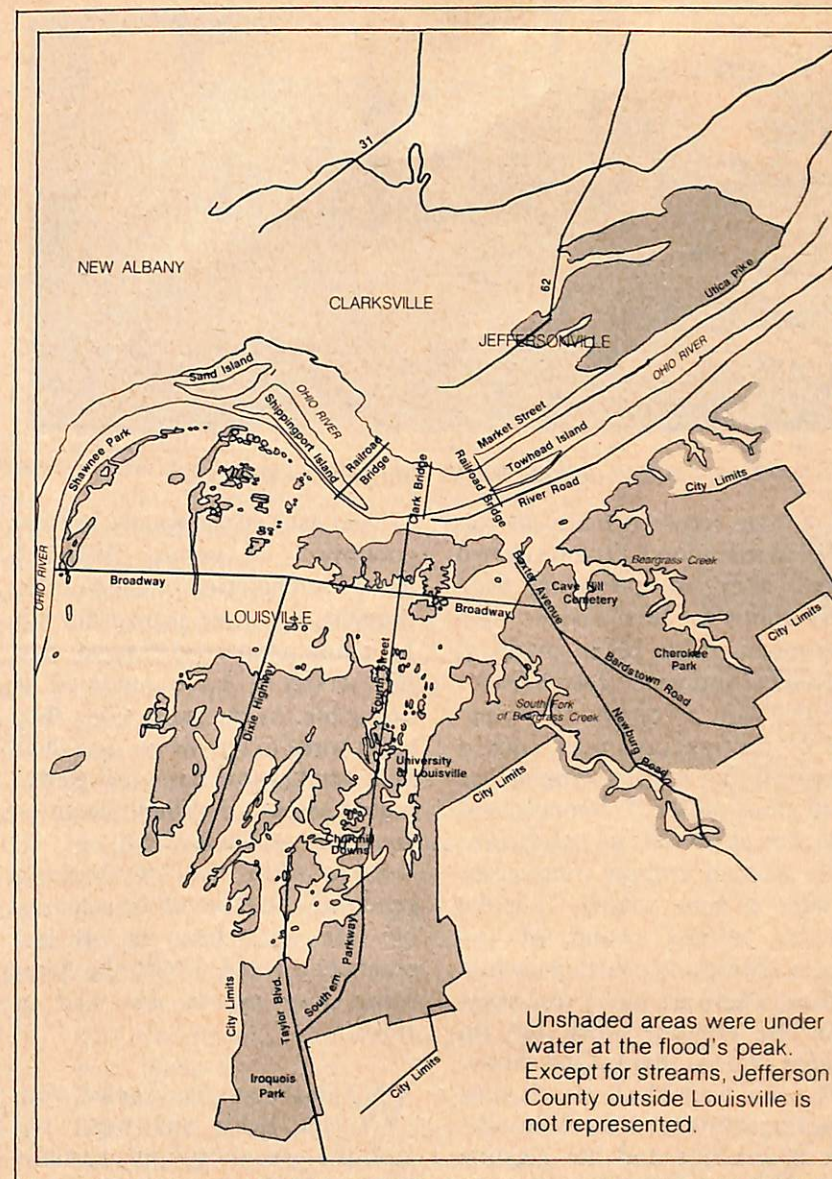
The worries varied from neighborhood to neighborhood — and sometimes from social class to social class. Charles B. Price Sr. watched the rising water from his home in Glenview. "Mother began showing the strain she was under," he wrote his son at Phillips Exeter Academy and his daughter at Vassar. "[She] got one of her bad headaches and I feared was having a touch of the flu. Ugh! How game she was — would not give in for fear the servants would become panicky and leave."

Those closer to the rising water had more immediate fears. In a letter to her daughter, Emma Stafford described a family who took refuge in her Highlands home. They came, she wrote, "with their belongings hanging on their arms, dog and all. [The wife's] hair was all mussed. She talked and talked and talked. I said, to Dad, she appears to be losing her mind. She was upset because she didn't know what became of all her household effects. Their new car was completely submerged in their garage."

Still, people tried to stay with their homes, clinging to familiar surroundings as the unbelievable water poured in. The sound of water flowing through basement windows was unforgettable, magnified by emotion, until it sounded like the roar of Niagara Falls. "Mother was awake all night, hearing things bump around in the basement," wrote Loretta Geywitz, of 3902 Garfield Ave.

Some couldn't believe the water would reach them. Nelson Condra, now 75, lived at 1221 Lincoln Drive in Clarksville, Ind. The little brick house he rented was a mile from the river and perched on a hill some 30 feet above the street. He and his wife, Roqual, thought they were safe.

But the river continued to rise. After a few days, Condra walked along the high ground near the Pennsylvania Railroad Bridge and looked out on the sickening panorama of the flood-swollen river. "The torrents were carrying every kind of debris," he wrote



Broadway. "For block after block we are in water so deep that we could stand and touch the trolley wires. Where traffic lights hang at intersections, a standing man must duck. . . ."

It was difficult to avoid the trauma of seeing your home and neighborhood and city swept by the river. Jim Fulks Sr., a 21-year-old grocery manager, helped refugees reach the safety of Parkland Junior High School, at 26th and Wilson, one of the islands of high ground in the West End. "We had planks going from boats to dry land and spent the day helping people get across," he remembered recently. "I would take their hands to steady them. Each hand was tense and nervous. Finally an old lady put her hand in mine, and she was as relaxed as she could be. I looked at her. She was blind."

The rising waters fragmented families, separating husbands from wives, children from parents. It also separated humans from their pets, something that could be just as traumatic. Stranded and starving dogs whined and howled in the cold nights. "A big German police dog is marooned on the hood of a truck," wrote Grafton. "Every few minutes he slips off into the icy water. He is getting weak and has a hard time dragging himself up over the headlights and fenders. When he shakes himself, his feet slip and he takes another dive. He stands shivering, and looks at us pathetically."

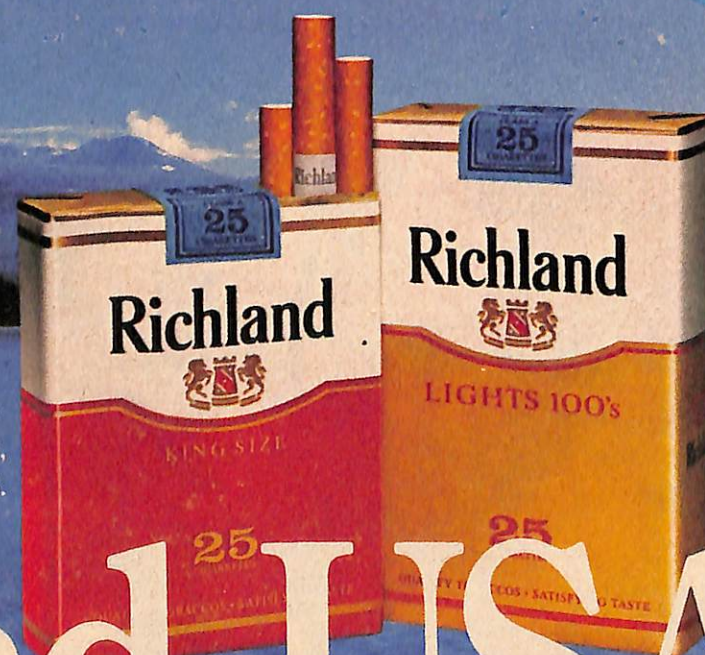
Many starving animals were shot. The Animal Rescue League later reported picking up 920 dogs, 69 cats and one goat. The goat was claimed by its owner, but most of the dogs and cats had to be destroyed.

Some animals were more resourceful in the midst of disaster. In Tell City, Ind., John and Maggie Chenault left some hams hanging from the rafters of the house they had abandoned during the flood. When they returned, they found that rats had swum through the water and climbed up to the hanging meat. While the humans were huddling in refugee centers, the rats had feasted.

The flood pushed many families into areas where they would not normally linger. Continued

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